

**Itinerant Teaching Program in the
Elementary Grades**

By Dorothy L. Misbach

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ITINERANT TEACHING is a form of education by which blind children may attend the local public school and live at home as other children do. The itinerant teacher supplements the regular school program by teaching braille and other skills requiring individual help, and acquaints the child, teacher and parents with equipment especially designed for visually handicapped children. The itinerant teacher of necessity can teach only a limited number of children since much of her time is spent in traveling from one student to another and in preparation of materials to be used in the regular classroom.

It would seem that itinerant teaching is increasingly gaining in popularity. This is not a new idea for in individual cases blind people had attended public schools for many years. In the early stages of the development of this program at state level, some educators who were affiliated with the well-established program for blind children seemed to look upon this new form of education as a threat. It would seem that there will always be need for educating blind children in groups; in cities where there are enough children to warrant establishing resource rooms—possibly in several forms—this type of program is to be encouraged.

A resource room is a room in a centrally located public school usually in a metropolitan area, having special equipment for blind children and hav-

ing a teacher trained in special skills. The blind children are enrolled in the regular classroom, coming to the resource room to learn braille and to borrow or use the special equipment when it is needed. The resource room teacher serves as a consultant to all staff members working with visually handicapped children.

In states where it is impossible to set up an itinerant program due mainly to geographical problems, the school for the blind must be used to a greater extent for all children and can operate in a flexible way to accommodate some itinerant children. In states where it is possible to have the three types of program—the itinerant teaching, the resource room in a regular public school, and the school for the blind, there is an additional opportunity to take care of new problems which may occur in various families that would necessitate changing from one type of program to another.

With the recent increase in the number of visually handicapped children, areas supporting itinerant teaching should have ample opportunity to prove the value of this form of education. There should be sufficient need for all three types of programs so that it would not be necessary to think in terms of one versus the other.

Itinerant teaching can be an inspiring form of teaching as well as a difficult one. To be an outstanding itinerant

teacher one needs all of the qualities of a good teacher; a keen understanding of human relations is essential since the teacher is dealing with many people of varying ages; and administrative ability is necessary since it is often the task of the itinerant teacher to sell the idea of this program to a school, anticipating problems before they arise, and through counseling as well as teaching help to make the program function successfully. Needless to say, she must be adept at reading and writing braille since this is the particular skill she is expected to teach.

Establishing an Itinerant Teaching Program

In establishing an itinerant teaching program and thinking in terms of placing a particular child in his community school, it is desirable to know the child well. If records have been kept during the child's preschool years so that his stages of development are known, this is very helpful to the person attempting to sell the idea to the public school administration. An eye report from a good ophthalmologist is essential. While psychological evaluations for young children may be questioned as to their validity, certainly recorded observations by a trained psychologist during the kindergarten and/or nursery school days can prove highly beneficial. If we are to know more about children with retrolental fibroplasia during their early years, having trained personnel make recorded observations should be an effective way of building toward greater understanding and better programing.

With the knowledge of the early developmental patterns, an eye report, and the observations of a trained psychologist, an itinerant teacher is well fortified in approaching the public school administrators. It would be hoped that the person applying for entrance for the blind child to the public

school would also be acquainted with the members of the child's family through personal visits in the home. The more knowledge one has of the child and his family the easier it should be in helping to look at the situation from the superintendent's or principal's point of view.

Often entrance of a blind child to a nursery school or kindergarten with seeing children is not too difficult, for teachers of children this age realize that many of the activities of seeing children are also activities of all children. When the person applying for entrance explains that the blind child may need a little orientation to the physical surroundings of the room and the playground possibly a day or two before the other children arrive and that she would be willing to come with the child for the first day to help with further suggestions, the classroom teacher is quite receptive of the blind child being with her group.

Usually the nursery school or kindergarten age child has a happy and successful year with his seeing companions. It would be hoped that a social worker or counselor would have close contact with the home and the school during the early days of the child's entrance into the new school situation. This is a very, very important step in the life of every child and is particularly true for the blind child. The teacher, the parent, and the child may need counsel and encouragement from time to time. At the close of the year the classroom teacher is often an enthusiastic promoter of having a blind child as a member of her group.

Having observed the blind child in a kindergarten group and knowing his earlier background, one has a basis for considering whether or not it is desirable to think in terms of a public school program for him. If the child seems well adjusted socially and emotionally, is of



Linda, a totally blind child using her braille writer while she works with sighted children in a resource room at the Syracuse University Demonstration School during the summer of 1955. Linda is regularly enrolled in an itinerant program. She is a student at Oaks School, Oceanside, New York.

average or better than average mental ability, has a happy home life, and is looked upon favorably by the community his chance for success in the public school program receiving itinerant teaching services is almost a certainty. Another point that must be considered is the availability of the itinerant teacher. If a child is beginning the first grade, visiting a minimum of three times a week is essential. Four or five rather short visits per week are preferred for the first grade in particular.

In many ways the first grade is the most difficult grade in an itinerant teaching program for much of the work in a public school class is directed toward beginning to read which involves considerable visual work. There is need

for scientific exploration of the area of readiness for blind children and the preparation of adequate materials. A form of commercial material however should never take the place of a teacher's initiative in building the materials that will best fit her situation. Materials are mentioned here because there is an immediate need for them, but whether or not a child is ready to read and to do the formal type of academic work should mean familiarizing oneself with the child's stages of development and evaluating him as an individual physically, mentally and emotionally. The actual reading readiness material is a very small portion of the whole field of reading readiness.

A good itinerant teacher conferring

often with the regular classroom teacher and observant of the type of activities being carried out in the regular classroom can, through her own ingenuity, help to bridge this difficult gap. If itinerant teaching services are not available daily, unless the blind child is precocious, it is probable that the blind child in the early stages of reading may be a little slower than the children who are reading by sight. One of the big advantages is that this blind child need not be asked to progress any more rapidly than he is ready for advancement since he is receiving individual instruction in braille. It is a happy day for teacher and child when the blind child sits in the reading circle with his seeing friends to read with them. If the braille is double-spaced, phrased as the print material is phrased, and has manuscript writing above the braille, then the teacher or good student, even though he does not know braille, can assist the blind child when he needs it. Another important point in the child's academic life is the time he begins asking for other stories, realizing that reading is fun! The alert braille teacher will try to see that extra braille material on an easy reading level is as available for the blind child as are books for his seeing friends. Braille books might be on the reading table or in the community library that he and other children visit.

Once the child has learned how to read braille and has discovered the joy and satisfaction of reading, the teaching of braille from that point on requires the routine teaching techniques. As he is encouraged to read widely on his reading level his speed and know-how will improve. A few skills might need additional emphasis in the itinerant program such as locating print pages and braille pages rapidly, using the table of contents with ease, skimming rapidly to locate an idea or name, locating new paragraphs quickly, and

following the oral reading of a seeing person skillfully.

It might be well to mention the importance of phonics to a visually handicapped child. There is still considerable controversy about the teaching of phonics but in the opinion of this writer every child needs some phonic training. A blind child in particular will have need for some means of attaching new words since the regular classroom teacher will not know braille, and since beyond the first grade the braille is single spaced and often interpoint, it is not advisable to write above it. Anything that can be done to help the blind child be self-sufficient is desirable.

Grade two braille has been accepted generally and seems not to have presented the problems educators anticipated. If teachers were concerned about the effect it would have on spelling, this seems to have been easily overcome in this program in most cases through the natural course of events. The blind child, not having someone at hand who knows braille, learns at an early age the importance of correct spelling. The regular classroom teacher finding spelling an easy means of familiarizing herself with braille may put undue emphasis upon it.

Talking Book

The Talking Book is a helpful mechanical device to use in the itinerant teaching program. If the child has used a record player during his preschool years, operating the machine himself, handling the Talking Book will not be a difficult task for him. To get the most use from this device it is helpful to have the machine and records in excellent running order and located in a convenient place for group or individual listening. The blind child may enjoy using the Talking Book with earphones while the other children are participating in activities that might not

be too meaningful to him. More attention needs to be given in preparing good recordings for the young child. If there is a wealth of this material, the Talking Book machine can be a good means of helping the blind child to learn to share his materials with his seeing friends. Learning to be an attentive listener is important for every visually handicapped child.

When recorded materials on discs as produced by volunteer workers can be played back with the satisfaction now true of Talking Books, new avenues of listening should be available for these children. There is a need for producing current materials so that the blind child can use his materials when the seeing child does.

Braille Writing and Typing

The use of the braille writer for the child beginning braille should be a commonly accepted fact. When his hands are strong enough to press the keys down on the writer, his co-ordination good enough to manage the mechanics of the machine, and he asks questions about the writing of braille, he should be given an opportunity to "play" with the braille writer. Since the brailler is an expensive piece of equipment it should be used only under the supervision of the itinerant teacher in the beginning. Knowing that the regular classroom teacher and his classmates will be curious about this equipment the itinerant teacher and the child might want to demonstrate its use, explaining the importance of careful handling.

Working with the child on an individual basis, it is easy to tell when the use of the slate should be introduced. Some children may have become very adept at using the brailler when in the third grade and would find it helpful to learn to use the slate. Others might

not have need for the slate until the fourth or fifth grade. If the child has good co-ordination there is usually an easy transition from one to the other.

There is probably a need for introducing typing earlier in this program than in a resource room or school for the blind since the blind child has use for a written means of communication with the classroom teacher and the members of his class. As soon as the child has mastered the skill of braille reading, and writes on the braille writer with ease, the typewriter might be introduced. This will be an individual matter but could be introduced during the third or fourth grade. The typing lessons prepared jointly by the American Printing House for the Blind and the American Foundation for the Blind in recorded form have been used successfully with young blind children. With a little revision and some additions these lessons could be used readily by most blind children in an itinerant teaching program.

Some materials such as maps, globes, dictionaries and possibly books are still too big and cumbersome to be used comfortably in an itinerant teaching program. Simple, durable desk-sized maps should be of value to all blind children. Smaller globes would be helpful. Dictionaries cannot be changed too much because of the natural bulk of any dictionary, but the weight of paper cover books, size in volume, size of book, should be evaluated for press and hand brailled books.

Volunteer Services

For success in an itinerant teaching program it is very important to have a well-organized volunteer service to help produce the braille and recorded material children will need when such books are not available through other sources. Books brailled by volunteer

workers, resource room teachers or itinerant teachers are more readily handled if small in size, light in weight, and should be bound so that the book will open with ease and lie flat on the pupil's desk.

In an itinerant teaching program it is important for the itinerant teacher to be flexible and to be willing to travel along with the classroom teacher even though there may be differing opinions about teaching methods. If the classroom teacher finds it helpful to use workbooks, the itinerant teacher will want to see that workbooks are made available in braille in the best form possible. The preparation of workbooks is an area that needs further exploration since much of the printed material requires visual use. If the classroom teacher does not believe in teaching phonics in formal lessons, the itinerant teacher might work some of this information in while teaching the child braille. Perhaps the art teacher or physical education teacher might need encouragement or helpful suggestions for their classes. Flexibility is a desirable quality.

The blind child attending classes and playing with seeing children has a natural incentive to learn to travel independently. Learning the use of a cane and the techniques and skills that go with physical orientation has been approached from the point of view of the blind adult. It would seem that all teachers working with blind children would want to view this whole area of physical orientation with open minds. Much can be done, it would seem, in helping the blind child to develop his sense of hearing, his sense of smell, his desire to explore, and it is important to help him know satisfaction in being

independent when it is safe to be independent and to ask for and accept help graciously when that is necessary.

If an itinerant teaching program can function successfully on the elementary grade level—and it has been demonstrated that such a program can be successful—there should not be much difficulty in carrying this program into the junior and senior high school area. In these grades more brailled and recorded material can be used; reader service is essential to help the student keep up with current material or to give a helping hand when some form of tutoring is needed to cover more difficult subjects adequately. Counseling in its best form is required to keep the many teachers in the junior and senior grades informed of the services and materials available for blind students, to help the student plan his program, and to assist all school personnel in understanding the blind student by helping him to function at his best.

Legislation to implement the administration of this program is to be considered. Adequate funds for equipping rooms and supplying materials, paying a good salary to a well-trained teacher and laws for promoting adequate education for individual visually handicapped children are mandatory in establishing a good program. Today the parent of many a blind child is presenting educators a real challenge in his desire to have his blind child live at home, attend a public school, and become an active member in the community in which he lives. We as educators of blind children, in whatever form of education we are supporting, should stand ready to accept this challenge in assisting parents toward developing happy, healthy, well-rounded citizens.



